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BY STEWART ALSOP

THEY MAY MAKE IT

SAIGON—They just might make it. The South Vietnamese just might be able to hold their own against the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong after American combat troops have been withdrawn. This is the admittedly rather timid conclusion that this reporter has reached on his fourth trip to this pretty, dirty, sad little country.

The conclusion is surprising all the same, for all logic and past experience would seem to argue against it. The North Vietnamese are moving in across the long, indefensible borders, as we Americans move out. Every past optimistic prediction about this cruel little war has proved cruelly false.

For such reasons, before coming here my instinct was that the Communists would certainly prevail, rather sooner than later. Now my instinct is that the South Vietnamese really might make it—and that is also the instinct of many able people here who know a great deal about this war.

Much has been written about the sudden improvement in the situation here. But you have to have been here before really to smell the difference. On a trip from Ca Mau near the tip of the Mekong Delta to the central provincial town of Can Tho, with pacification chief William Colby (an old friend from World War II), the difference was everywhere evident. The southern delta has been Viet Cong turf for a generation. But now, on roads until very recently firmly controlled by the VC, you saw government soldiers, M-16s slung across their backs, in little groups or even alone, walking or riding on Hondas or minibuses. What was most interesting about the eight-hour trip was what happened. Nothing happened—not so much as a sniper round.

NO DANGER

To old Vietnam hands, this will be as interesting as the dog that didn't bark was to Sherlock Holmes. Only a few months ago, to drive unescorted from Ca Mau to Can Tho was considered suicidal. Now the only apparent danger came from the swaying trucks careening along the abominable roads.

A couple of days further north with another old friend, Charles Whitehouse, chief U.S. civilian official in III Corps, told the same story. Wherever you go, you hear the same sort of thing:

An American major, a district adviser

in the middle delta: "I worked myself out of a job here—this is a job for a civilian now."

A Vietnamese province chief in the lower delta: "We have defeated the Viet Cong. There remain, of course, the North Vietnamese."

A U.S. civilian official in Tay Ninh: "A year ago, we couldn't go beyond that fence without an infantry company. Now we go anywhere—and look around, this place is just booming."

An American colonel in Hau Nghia: "We ran out of body counts around here—they're all over in Cambodia."

William Colby: "The Viet Cong are clearly in the course of being defeated."

Charles Whitehouse: "I don't think I'm fooling myself—I really think we have the VC on the ropes."

BIG CHANGE

Even the more dove-minded of the correspondents and the more skeptical of the junior officials and officers agree that there has been a very big change for the better. One reason for the change is that we Americans have learned a lot about fighting this kind of war.

The notion that the U.S. Army can win the war alone, with superior firepower and big units used "by the book," has been abandoned. The even more absurd notion that American soldiers—big, smelly, utterly alien—can "win the minds and hearts of the people," and thus perform the infinitely delicate political task of pacification, has also been abandoned. In most areas, U.S. troops are already being used as backup forces against big-unit attack, while the Vietnamese go about the business of clearing the hamlets of VC.

Meanwhile, American ingenuity has produced all sorts of useful tricks and techniques—Rome plows to make infiltration barriers, miracle rice, the terrifying B-52 strikes, airborne sensors, river patrols, simplified roadbuilding techniques, and so on. This is the sort of thing we Americans are good at.

But the great change has been on the Vietnamese side. A symbol of change is the fact that more people carry guns in this country than at any time since a man felt naked without a gun in our own Wild West. After the Tet attacks, President Thieu took the decision to arm the populace, despite the lively fear in the Saigon bureaucracy that the

guns might be turned round. The decision has paid off militarily, but above all politically, for all those guns commit their bearers.

Tet forced the people to choose. They have chosen, not so much for the government, as against the Viet Cong. As a result the water, in Mao Tse-tung's famous analogy, is no longer healthy for the fish.

Certain caveats obviously need to be entered. It is very noticeable that the Americans here would much rather talk about the present than the future. For it is Orwellian to suppose that the military situation will get better and better as more and more American combat troops go home. It seems logically likely to get worse.

Moreover, there remains what one high American officer calls "that damnable border." I flew along the Cambodian border with Charles Whitehouse in a helicopter—below, the trails led across from Cambodia like searching fingers, into the shelter of the canopied jungle. The question seemed obvious: how could this war, or any war, be ended, as long as the rules permit one side only to cross the border?

DELTA TEST

Moreover, although the Viet Cong may be "in the course of being defeated," they are not defeated yet—the day after we drove from Ca Mau to Can Tho, two main bridges on the route were blown by the VC. One senses a certain fragility—a hard blow by the Communist side might reverse the whole process.

The test seems likely to come in the delta. The Communist high command has chosen the delta for the next big push—more than a division of North Vietnamese have been sent in, and more are on the way. With all U.S. ground troops already withdrawn from the delta, the Communist push should provide a laboratory test of the theory of Vietnamization.

Both Americans and Vietnamese are surprisingly confident that the push can be contained. If the South Vietnamese can withstand the test in the delta, and if President Nixon withstands the pressure to pull out precipitately, the Vietnamese really will have a chance to make it—perhaps a pretty good chance. We can do no more than give them that chance—and no less.

Vietnam

23 DEC 1969

Ray Cromley / Operation Phoenix

WHILE we must relentlessly seek out the truth at My Lai (Song My), whatever horrors that search develops, it is unseemly to turn to self-abasement and accuse ourselves of all manner of wrongs we have not committed.

Take, for example, a recent letter to the editor in the New York Times. The writers claim that Operation Phoenix . . . "is an official policy of our Government" . . . in which "we murder civilians employed by the Viet Cong" . . . It is, they say, "as much an atrocity as the murder of 2,300 civilians in Hue" (by the Viet Cong).

They further allege that "according to statistics provided by our own government, some 18,000 civilians were killed (in Phoenix) in 1968 and more than 13,000 this year."

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LET us analyze these statements.

FIRST — The truth is that more than 84 per cent of the 18,000 civilians allegedly killed in the Phoenix program in 1968 and the 13,000 allegedly killed in 1969 were, in fact, captured alive or deserted to our side and are still alive today.

Less than one out of six were killed, and these died resisting arrest — a remarkably low figure when it is remembered that numbers of these are armed intelligence agents, security men (Gestapo-type strong arm types), enforcers, civilian terrorists and assassins. Most are hard core and armed. Numbers are



captured in military operations in VC-controlled areas.

SECOND — The object of Operation Phoenix is to capture, not kill. There are compelling military-political reasons for this. Live prisoners talk; dead men don't. The information and the help these cadres give after capture is essential if the core of the underground is to be rooted out and the war won. Note these Phoenix examples:

- A South Vietnamese Army unit liberating a village long held by the VC is accompanied by policemen armed with lists that contain the specific names of 20 out of say 35 VC who rule the village. Once captured, these 20 may "sing," implicating their VC comrades.

- A Viet Cong district chief is seized with 20 of his bodyguards and operations lieutenants, including the Communist intelligence chief for the area. The capture leads to a stock of valuable enemy intelligence documents.

- Hue police receive a tip that a Viet Cong propaganda specialist will attend a particular meeting. Captured en route, he identifies eight other VC cadre. Fifteen more arrests follow.

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THIRD — Phoenix is not aimed at the enemy rank and file or civilians they employ. It is directed at the estimated 80,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese cadre — the brains and power of the terrorist underground organization.

These include the cadre who organize and operate the guerrilla bands, order assassinations, draft young men and women for guerrilla and other military operations, direct terror campaigns, organize and carry out propaganda, collect taxes and run the local hamlet, village, district and provincial undergrounds.